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San Francisco mayor's race awash in soft money

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(12-10) 00:48 PST SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- Exploiting a campaign finance loophole opened by his lawyer, Mayor Willie Brown is benefiting from at least \$1.1 million in special interest spending, much of it from sources that won't be disclosed until after the Dec. 14 election, city records show.

The total for so-called soft money is about 800 times greater than in the 1995 mayor's race, when combined independent expenditures for all candidates totaled just \$1,250.

"He's writing the game plan for the future" of political fundraising by limiting donations to his own campaign and allowing interest groups to collect and spend unlimited funds on his behalf, says Charles Marsteller of California Common Cause.

Brown's challenger, Board of Supervisors President Tom Ammiano, accuses the mayor of selling out to Big Business. But the mayor's official reports show his campaign has received not one penny from "business entities" since Nov. 2.

Instead, that money has gone to independent committees unrestrained by the city's contribution law, which limits donations to \$250 during mayoral runoffs.

Backed by developers, labor unions and large corporations, these committees have paid for fliers, phone banks and at least one television ad suggesting that Ammiano's ideas could bankrupt the city.

As of Thursday, nine committees had spent more than \$1,096,000 for Brown since Nov. 27, including at least \$283,000 from labor groups and \$81,000 from the state Democratic Central Committee. Two groups supporting Ammiano spent a combined \$4,500 on newspaper ads, according to reports filed with the city and county's Ethics Commission.

The commission, which monitors political donations and spending, had not yet tallied overlapping spending figures reported to the city's Elections Department.

The unprecedented flow of soft money is in addition to at least \$297,000 that went directly into Brown's campaign coffers and \$132,000 collected by Ammiano's campaign since the general election. Brown also has money left over from before Nov. 2, but has agreed to abide by a \$400,000 limit on campaign spending.

"People are expressing their support with their pocketbooks and that results in more speech, which in my view is a good thing," said attorney Joe Remcho, who represents Brown and the Democratic Party on campaign finance matters.

Remcho opened the floodgates for soft money in September. As lead attorney for San

Franciscans for Sensible Government, a political action committee representing large corporations, he persuaded a federal judge to overturn the city's 1992 rule that committees must adhere to the same limits as campaigns.

"Remcho's involvement puts Willie Brown's fingerprints directly on the lawsuit which overturned contribution limits to independent expenditure committees," said Marsteller.

"Charlie can say whatever he wants," Remcho responded. "Just because SFSG and the mayor on different occasions found it helpful for us to do the litigation doesn't mean there are any fingerprints."

Ammiano campaign manager Esther Marks says she's not aware of any more money being spent on Ammiano's behalf. Instead, the campaign hopes that thousands of unpaid volunteers will help get out the vote on Tuesday.

"We hope and suspect that suspect that it's going to work against them because I have to believe that most people are going to be sick at the use of that kind of money to win an election," she said.

By law, donations and spending by the independent committees must not be coordinated by the candidates' campaigns. But no law prevents the groups from coordinating with each other, as Robert Barnes, one of several political consultants working for Brown's re-election, stressed Thursday.

"You don't want everybody tripping over each other. So there have been several attempts to make sure everyone is doing a good solid piece of this in their own right," Barnes said.

For example, shortly after ten donors founded the Willie Brown Leadership PAC on Nov. 24, it transferred \$150,000 to the Alice B. Toklas Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club, a gay and lesbian group that used the money for a 30-second TV ad showing an interracial gay couple deciding to vote for Brown.

"Tom has some pretty far out tax proposals," a black man says in the script Barnes wrote. "Good point," his white partner responds. "Tom just doesn't have the experience to unify this crazy town."

A typical expenditure by the Toklas group before was \$20,000 for a slate card, Marsteller said. "You have money flowing into committees that have never seen anything like this. It's a factor of 10 times what they normally would do."

The source of some donations to these groups is clear. For example, the Building Owners and Managers Association, a landlord's group, gave \$22,600 this week to SFSG, which has spent more than \$418,000 to support Brown's re-election.

But at least two of the groups -- SFSG and the county Democratic Committee -- won't disclose their contributors until January, citing state law that requires only expenditures to be immediately disclosed by county-based organizations.

"That's a big stretch. San Francisco is a city and a county, not a city or a county," says Kim Alexander of the California Voter Foundation, a Sacramento-based nonprofit that seeks to

educate voters on campaign laws.

“It is really disconcerting because voters have tried for years to clean up elections in that city and make politicians more accountable through a variety of reforms,” she said. “It’s a shame that message is not getting through.”